

Adapted from [Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents](#)

Deborah Appleman


# Literary Lenses & Criticism



# What is a Critical Lens?



**Literary criticism** is an attempt to evaluate and understand the creative writing, the literature of an author. Literary criticism is a description, analysis, evaluation, or interpretation of a particular literary work or an author's writings as a whole in an attempt to expose the hidden ideologies embedded in those texts.

**Critical Lenses** are different perspectives through which the reader can “view” a text.

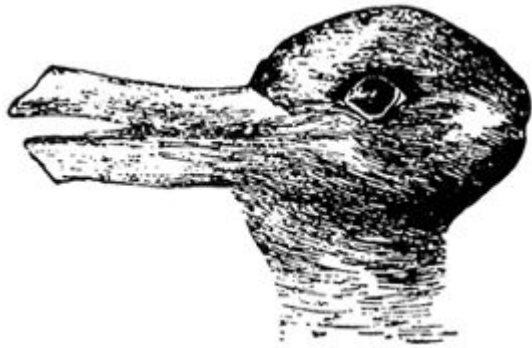




# Multiple Perspectives

- Yes, there are multiple ways to read a novel.
  - It is the comparison, analysis, interpretation, or evaluation of a given work.
  - Opinionated but SUPPORTED by textual evidence in regards to theme, style, historical context, setting, etc. Basically whatever the focus is for the given work.
    - THIS IS KEY.
  - We can all have different interpretations when we read a novel, but we must root them within textual evidence.
- 
- 

# Multiple Perspectives



Do you see a Rabbit or a Duck?



Do you see an old woman or a young woman?

# Different Lenses

• **Gender**

• **Social Power/ Marxist Criticism**

• Biographical

• **Archetypical**

• **Reader Response**

• Formalist

• **Historical**

• **Postcolonial**

• Structuralist

• Deconstructionist

• Psychological

•

• Some lenses lend themselves to certain texts better, but there is no “right” lens to read with each text.



# Formalist Criticism

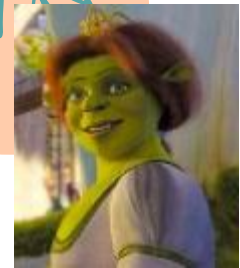
- You have been doing this for years!
- This looks at the piece of literature as a **whole**.
- How do each of the pieces form the whole?



# Feminist/Gender Criticism

**Examines the gender roles and power structures at play in the literature**

- 1) Are there female or homosexual characters present in the work? What might the absence/ or limited appearance of these characters imply? (Why do no girl hobbits go on Frodo's adventure?)
- 2) Are the female or homosexual characters characterized in largely positive or largely negative ways? Is it stereotypical? Are they given characterization at all? What might this imply?
- 3) Do the female or homosexual characters play an active role in determining their fate? Or are they largely objects that require action from male characters?
  - Think about pieces of literature you have read that showcase this.



# Marxist Criticism

- **Examines the portrayals of social class and power structures within the text**
- 1) Which characters in the work are from higher social class? Which are from lower? Who has the money, power, or advantage in the story? Who does not? What are the results of this?
- 2) How do the different class portrayals work to reproduce or maintain certain social beliefs and practices?
- Think about pieces of literature you have read that showcase this.





# Archetypal Criticism



“The word “archetype” means a recognizable pattern or model in storytelling from around the world. This is thought to reflect “universal, even primitive, ways of seeing the world” (Applebaum 142).


“We can recognize archetypes in the kinds of stories told, the themes or situations apparent in them, and the kinds of characters that appear in them. Some of the best stories play against the archetype to create “surprises” for the reader.

- ▣ How is the hero similar to heroes from other stories?
- ▣ How is the villain? Sidekicks?
- ▣ What common themes or situations can we see between this story and other stories we’ve read?
- ▣ What common symbolism is apparent in this work?
  - Think about pieces of literature you have read that showcase this.





# Reader Response Criticism



- Assumes that the reader is responsible for making meaning from a story, and downplays the author's role in the process.
  - The reader's relationship to events within the text or ability to relate to experiences within the text is an important part of the reading experience.
    - How did this text make you feel? What parts were you able to identify with? What did it remind you of? Each of these questions is a valuable part of the reading process.
- 





# Historical Criticism

**Assumes that readers should know the historical context (circumstances) of the time during which the author wrote or the setting of the story.**

- How does the historical setting of the story influence the events of the story or the themes that are present?
  - How does the context of the times during which the author wrote influence these factors?
- 
- 

# Post Colonial

“Assumes the literature written by colonizing forces (I.E. Western Literature) downplays or minimizes the effect of colonization, or somehow justifies the colonization of that population.

▣ How are colonized people portrayed if referenced in text?

▣ What cultural conflicts exist? How are they resolved?

▣ How are the colonized portrayed as “Others” within the text

“Post colonialists will look at the “Others” perspective in the story, and try to find the **counter-narrative** embedded in every story.

- Think about pieces of literature you have read that showcase this.



# Critical Lens over *The Lion King*

• Feminist/Gender: Can be viewed as the helpless role females have in society. The female lions are used to provide food and care for the young yet it is the males that have all the power. When Mufasa dies his power transfers to either his son or his brother. His wife is never even considered. Nala is also clearly “stronger” than Simba yet she is considered inferior.

• Marxist: Can be viewed as the upper class (lions) trying to maintain power over an unhappy lower class (hyenas). The lower class resents the privileges of better food and hunting grounds that the upper class maintains. This conflict causes a rebellion, which disrupts the normal social order causing chaos and destruction.

• Archetypal: Simba represents the classic hero quest. Simba suffers from a loss of a father figure and must go off on a journey to grow into his destiny. During his journey he meets tricksters (Timon/Pumba) who also act as his helpers and finds a mentor (crazy monkey with a stick). Nala also acts as the herald as she upsets the sleepy equilibrium in which the Simba has lived and starts his growth. He then has enough strength (mental and physical) to overcome the villain and restore everything to order.

